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Atari Online News, Etc.
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A-ONE #0821 05/26/06

~ Google Tops Survey! ~ People Are Talking! ~ Operation Global Con!
~ MySpace Challenged? ~ Windows Live Mail Bugs ~ QuarkXPress 7 Ships!
~ Nintendo Wii Price Set ~ Schools MySpace Pledge ~ New 'World Cup' Worm!
~ LAPD Launches Web Log! ~ Vista Gets More Tests! ~ Webroot Unfazed!

-* ICM Renews XXX Domain Quest! *-
-* U.S. Accused of Unfair Dominance! *-
-* Mergers To Be Next Trend for Web Companies *-

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->From the Editor’s Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Well, here we are on the verge of the unofficial beginning of summer! It’s Memorial Day weekend - a time for the barbecue season to officially begin! I got an early start, as I usually do. The new barbecue grill has already been initiated, a number of times! The "monsoon" season finally ended, and it’s been really nice all week (until today, coincidentally). Many of my previously-determined outdoor tasks are almost complete. But, then I did something foolish and ordered a truckload of loam and bark mulch to put down! I must be a masochist! Actually, I needed both. After having a few trees taken down and the stumps ground down, my lawn is a real disaster. Plenty of ground up tree stumps laying around, and deep gouges in the lawn from the crane. The mulch is a nice touch in the gardens, and helps prevent weeds (I hate weeding!). I started planting my flowers after weeding (ugh!) the flower beds and turning the soil. I have my veggies, and the vegetable gardens have been tilled and ready to go. Next, getting the pool ready to open - perhaps this weekend, if my wife has her way. I’m also getting a number of projects completed inside the house! Yep, this is "retirement"! Well, I have played a little golf, and the driving range has had me busy for a couple of days trying to figure out where my swing went bad. I think a tune-up lesson is on the horizon.

I was going to go off on the recent stories regarding issues surrounding MySpace, but, because it’s a holiday weekend - a long holiday weekend - I’ll reserve those opinions for another week. Meanwhile, please remember to celebrate the "beginning" of summer responsibly!! If you’re going to drink, please do not drive! The life you save could be mine.

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

[Editor’s note: Due to the lack of messages on the Atari usenet groups this past week, there will be no column this week.]

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Nintendo Sets Wii Price!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" 'Heavenly Sword' Out!
Women Gain Prominence!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Nintendo: Wii Won't Top $250 in U.S. Market

Nintendo has announced that the price of Wii, its next-generation video game console, will not exceed $250 in the United States or $220 (25,000 yen) in Japan.

Between the fourth quarter of 2006 and March 31, 2007, Nintendo expects to ship 6 million Wii systems worldwide, the company said.

While the device lacks the same level of gaming power offered by Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Sony's PlayStation 3, its unique controller has prompted gamers to mark it as a contender.

Nintendo first demonstrated the Wii controller to the game community this month in Los Angeles at E3, the Electronic Entertainment Expo.

The Wii remote, which is equipped with a motion sensor in addition to the usual controls, can be used as a direct-action implement, allowing players to swing it like a light saber, sword or baseball bat in communication with the game being played.

The Wii became the underdog hit of E3, despite criticism of its quirky name, which is pronounced "we." (The device was called Revolution during development.)

Nintendo did not release pricing and availability at that time.

During E3, Sony announced that its PS3 would be available for $599 for the 60GB hard drive version and $499 for the 20GB version. Microsoft's Xbox 360 sells for between $299 and $399, depending on options, but the company has had problems meeting demand, frustrating both would-be customers and Microsoft stockholders. The company announced an increase in Xbox 360 production in March.

Heavenly Sword for Playstation 3

Emotionally charged, stunningly beautiful and delivering unprecedented dramatic character performance, Heavenly Sword showcases the power of PlayStation 3. A dramatic tale of revenge sees Nariko, a fiery red-haired heroine embark on a quest for vengeance against an invading King and his army. The story builds around the ancient Heavenly Sword which once belonged to a powerful deity. It can never be wielded by a mortal without it draining their life-force, killing them within hours.

When the invading King (played by Andy Serkis) destroys the warrior clan that guards the Heavenly Sword, the clan leader's daughter, Nariko, takes up the sword in a desperate fight for survival. Nariko must now pay the ultimate price as she embarks on one last mission of vengeance against the King and his army before her life is finally drawn to a close.

Andy Serkis, the world's leading CG actor, famous for his roles as Gollum in The Lord of the Rings and Kong in King Kong, was heavily involved in the creative process. As well as starring in Heavenly Sword as the villain, King Botan, Andy was a major contributor to the character development, writing, casting, directing and performance capture for the PlayStation 3 game.

Heavenly Sword features a deep, diverse combat experience made possible by PlayStation 3.

Key Combat Features

* The Heavenly Sword itself can Transform into Three Distinct Stances - Players can switch between on the fly allowing players to create their own fighting styles.
* The Combat Engine can Scale Up - From sophisticated one-on-one encounters to one-on-many, where enemies employ intelligent squad-based dynamics, right up to combat against battalions pushing real-time gameplay and AI to unprecedented new levels.
* Physics-based Combat - Players can sweep debris against opponents, kick tables to halt an oncoming surge of fighters, smash the enemy into the scenery or throw bodies into other enemies using aftertouch controls.
* Wide Range of Objects and Weaponry - Including multi-skewering spears and devastatingly explosive bazookas.
* Creative in-game Cinematography - Coupled with real-time story evolvement and amazing set-pieces makes the action feel like a blockbuster action movie and takes combat gameplay to new heights.

Women Gain Prominence in Video Game World

Traditionally, the only women in video games were digital. Think busty, pistol-packing Lara Croft of "Tomb Raider," or the scantily clad walking pinups in "Grand Theft Auto."

Beyond these stereotypical male fantasies, women were all but absent from the billion-dollar gaming industry. But that's changing, thanks to a core female gamers who are increasing women's visibility and influence.

These women are programmers, designers, tech students and members of all-female gaming groups that compete against guys for cash and corporate sponsorships. And experts say the industry stands to benefit.

"For this industry to mature and move on, it has to grow beyond just that 13- to 35-year-old male demographic," said Anthony Borquez, a professor who teaches video game production at the University of Southern California. "From a business perspective, it makes a lot of sense to engage women more."

Besides, sisters are doing it for themselves.

Amber Dalton and twin sister Amy Brady created the PMS Clan in 2002. Boasting international membership of nearly 500 women and girls, PMS - which stands for Pandora's Mighty Soldiers - is a competitive group that plays Xbox, PlayStation2 and PC games. Its members range in age from 9 to 58, Dalton said, but most are adults.

Learning about the Clan was "an epiphany" for game designer and devotee Felicia Williams.

"Finding a community where you can say that you play games was kind of like a confessional," said the 24-year-old New Yorker, who owns "every system ever released." "Having a support group out there that loves what you love, and seeing such a diverse group of successful, wonderful women is just hugely beneficial."

Clan members compete with each other and band together in professional tournaments. They also challenge the online harassment doled out by male gamers. PMS Clan rules prohibit "belittling or attacking others in any way, even in retaliation," according to its 30-page member manual.

Guys can be "vicious," said Dalton, 30.

"They say, 'You must be 300 pounds with a mustache,'" she said. "They hide behind the anonymity of (the game). Our group has a strict code of conduct. It takes someone showing the example."

The Clan's classy manners and tournament-worthy skills caught the attention of Microsoft.

The company hired the PMS Clan in April to represent Xbox Live. Rather than relying on public relations pros or "booth babes" to demonstrate its new games at May's E3 electronics expo, Xbox gave the duties to Clan members.

"They set great examples, not just for the female gamers, but for everybody," said Aaron Greenberg, a spokesman for Xbox Live. "They're serious. They practice. They're strict about being good to gamers."

Competitive female players also make gaming more social, he said.

Borquez, the USC professor, agreed. "They're creating unique ways of being able to communicate in games," he said. "Before it was all trash-talking."

Microsoft isn't the only company looking to competitive female gamers to promote products. Ubisoft, which produces games, assembled its own women-only gaming group, the Frag Dolls, nearly two years ago.

The seven-member Frag Dolls team touts new titles and competes in tournaments for the company, said spokesman Michael Beadle.

It was a surprise to find women who enjoyed hard-core gun-wielding games, he said, "and a pleasant surprise that they were really good."

"You only pick up these games to be real competitive," Beadle said.

Dalton said Clan members are also competitive in sports and business. Video games are just another outlet, she said.

Most members play about three hours a day. "Halo 2" and "Ghost Recon," both war games with male soldiers as main characters, are the top choices.

Role-playing games are also popular, said game designer Williams, adding that off-putting images in games that have women "portrayed as whores" may have kept some female players away.

Games reflect their designers, she said. But as more women enter the gaming industry, she expects to see more positive female characters.

Borquez has already seen creative contributions from the handful of female students in his video game classes. Their designs include sophisticated story lines, female characters and "shopping games of course," he said.

"It’s hard to have a middle-aged male trying to design a game that would hit the interest of female gamers," he said. "For the industry to continue to develop, there needs to be innovation from various demographics. Having a female element is such a great added value."

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Anti-Spyware Leader Unfazed by Microsoft

For millions of PC users, the privacy-snatching programs known as spyware have been nothing but a headache as they swipe personal information, slow systems to a crawl and crash computers. For Webroot Software Inc., the annoying programs have been the foundation of success.

Thanks to its market-leading anti-spyware software, Spy Sweeper, sales have soared 20-fold since 2002, and last year the privately held company raised an eye-popping $108 million in venture capital.

Though there’s little chance of spyware ever going away, Webroot is facing a significant challenge in the coming years: Microsoft Corp.’s upcoming Windows Vista operating system will include its own spyware-squashing tools.

Vista could put Webroot in the same shoes as RealNetworks Inc., Netscape Communications Corp. and others whose businesses have suffered after Microsoft bundled more features into its ubiquitous operating system.

Still, Webroot CEO David Moll seems unfazed.

"The taking of a second-best product in this space is akin to locking half the doors in your house," he said. "Vista will not solve the spyware problem. It may change the vector of attack, but it will not solve this problem. And I'll bet the company on it."

Some analysts say the company should broaden its focus - and Moll, without divulging details, said that's in the plans.

"Ultimately they need to offer more than just an anti-spyware package," Yankee Group senior analyst Andrew Jaquith said. "To do that, they need access to more money, or be part of a bigger company."

Moll said he expects 20 percent revenue growth this year, while Jaquith estimates current overall annual revenue at $75 million to $110 million. Jaquith said an initial public offering is more likely than a buyout because, he estimates, it could take $500 million to acquire the company - a sum he figured few rivals would be willing to pay.

Although an initial public offering isn't imminent, Moll said, Webroot is implementing some of the financial controls required for public companies.

Even before Vista ships to businesses later this year and to consumers in early 2007, Webroot faces formidable competition.

Anti-spyware programs from companies like Tenebril Inc., Lavasoft AB, McAfee Inc. and others all target the software that gets downloaded and installed onto PCs - often without users' knowledge - to monitor keystrokes or capture personal data and send it back to a third party.

Some of the rival programs are free, while others are included with broader security programs. Webroot charges $29.95 for the software and a year of updates and customer support.

Spy Sweeper, which was first released in 2003, has received strong reviews and it had 75 percent of the U.S. retail market last year for anti-spyware, besting both McAfee and Computer Associates International Inc., according to the NPD Group Inc., a market research firm.

For its part, Microsoft said customers should choose spyware protection that works best for them. In fact, Vista users will be able to turn off Windows Defender, if they choose, said Mike Chan, senior product manager for the anti-spyware program.

Many anti-spyware vendors set traps, or "honey pots," with algorithms that do the screening. Webroot's differentiator is Phileas, a computer system that actively hunts down spyware with the aim of catching new threats the day they are released.

To spark further innovation, Webroot employees who think of ideas that earn patents get bonuses of up to $2,000. Every so often, the company holds the "Spyware Smackdown," a game in which researchers act as spyware writers trying to avoid Spy Sweeper.

The company also invested $500,000 on a usability lab, in which cameras monitor volunteers as they use Webroot's software. That research then goes into improving the software's interface.

Webroot's efforts have paid off. Besides huge revenue growth helped by the release of Spy Sweeper in 2003, the company has grown from about a dozen employees to 300 in a purple-walled headquarters that look out on the Rocky

Mountains. Its conference rooms are named for dead rock stars such as Jerry Garcia.

Though Vista raises a cloud around Webroot’s continued success, the company is no stranger to escaping threats.

The company was launched in 1997 by Steve Thomas and then-girlfriend Kristen Talley. Thomas was a state chess champion at age 10 who landed on an FBI watch list at age 14 after he hacked into a supercomputer at the National Center for Atmospheric Research, Moll said.

After the couple’s relationship soured and sales plateaued at a few million dollars, Thomas and Talley in April 2002 hired Moll, a Duke University dropout who once worked at a screw machine factory in Cleveland to pay his way through night school.

At the time, Webroot sold a program for cleaning up unnecessary files on PCs, and revenues came evenly from Internet sales, AOL’s Shop Direct and retail.

Just months after Moll joined, AOL went through a management change and strategy shift and it shut down sales through Shop Direct. Moll, Thomas and Talley stopped taking paychecks, but by then Webroot was developing Spy Sweeper. The program came to market in February 2003.

More than three years later, Moll is confronted with another major challenge.

"I really do not see consumers going out to buy a best-of-breed anti-spyware product when they’re being handed it for free," said Natalie Lambert, a security analyst for Forrester Research Inc.

She said business customers may choose to stick with one vendor for all security software, so offering anti-viral software would be a natural move for Webroot.

Moll said Webroot soon will do just that.

"We don’t see customers satisfied with all their vendors," he said. "That creates tremendous opportunity for us."

500-Plus Nabbed in Global Internet Scams

Some 565 suspects were arrested in Europe and in North and South America in a crackdown on Internet fraud dubbed "Operation Global Con," US officials announced.

More than 2.8 million people, mainly elderly US citizens, fell victim to the scams, suffering losses totaling more than one billion dollars, the Justice Department said in a statement.

The operation, which began in March, targets mass-marketing scams such as bogus lottery, prize and sweepstakes offerings; offers of nonexistent investments; fake offers of "pre-approved" credit cards or credit-card protection; and tax fraud schemes.

In the United States 139 suspects were arrested, with an additional 426

arrests in Canada, Costa Rica, the Netherlands and Spain as well as the help of officials in Nigeria, Britain and New Zealand, the statement read.

"Mass-market fraudsters think they can use modern technology to operate from anywhere in the world with impunity," US Attorney General Alberto Gonzales said at a press conference.

"These criminals use telemarketing, the Internet and mass mailings to cheat unsuspecting people," he said.

World Cup Worm

World Cup soccer fans should be aware of a new worm being circulated by e-mail with the German-language message "WM-Tickets" or "Weltmeisterschaft," security vendor Sophos warned Wednesday.

The e-mail contains an attachment, which, when opened, activates the W32/Zasran-A worm. The worm is programmed to send itself to addresses stored in Microsoft Outlook address books and manipulate security settings to give hackers access to other personal information stored in users' PCs.

The Zasran-A worm is the second World Cup-related virus detected in May, with the games scheduled to kick off June 9.

On May 4, the Baden-Wuurttemberg State Bureau of Criminal Investigation (LKA) warned of an e-mail with a link to a self-extracting Excel file that claims to contain the game plan for the soccer tournament. The German-language e-mail contains the message "Fussball Weltmeisterschaft 2006 in Deutschland" (2006 World Cup Soccer Tournament in Germany) and the link "googlebook.exe."

When clicked, the link installs a Trojan horse on users' PCs. The program appears to have originated from a server in the U.S., according to LKA officials.

Sophos urges users to be extra vigilant against virus threats as excitement grows over the World Cup games.

Seemingly harmless World Cup screen savers, spreadsheets, and electronic wall charts are ideal vehicles to spread viruses and worms, according to the company.

The World Cup has prompted viruses in the past, and will likely in the future as well.

Ahead of the World Cup games in France in 1998, the WM97/ZMK-J virus asked PC users to gamble on who the winner could be, and if the user didn't choose the right team, it triggered a warhead that was capable of erasing all data on the hard drive, according to Sophos.

Last year, the world's governing soccer body, FIFA, warned fans and others that its name was being abused in a global phishing scam.

Several lottery companies had sent unsolicited, official-looking e-mail around the globe, announcing that recipients had won a lottery and requesting personal data, including bank account information, for them to claim the prize money. The lotteries claimed to be organized on behalf of,

or in association with, FIFA as well as the German organizers of the World Cup and their South African counterparts for the 2010 games.

U.S. Accused of Unfair Dominance in .xxx Wrestle Match

Newly released e-mails allege U.S. government officials pressured a leading Internet authority into voting against creating a kind of red-light district for adult Web sites.

The apparent involvement of the U.S. Department of Commerce, President Bush’s chief political operative Karl Rove and others is significant. If true, it means the U.S. government violated terms of a complicated arrangement it has with ICANN, the Internet authority that voted 9-5 last week not to OK the .xxx proposal.

What ICM Registry wants is permission to distribute Web addresses that end in .xxx to be used exclusively by adult entertainment sites.

The proposal won support from the Wired Safety & Wired Kids, the Internet Content & Ratings Association and other child safety groups because of the way it’s expected to make it easier for authorities and parents to police the Internet.

Detractors say it just makes it that much easier to find porn. ICANN voted it down 9-5, after seemingly being on track to approve of the effort.

Since the ICANN vote, ICM Registry has made public e-mails, here in PDF form, between members of the Department of Commerce, various other branches of the federal government and ICANN. The company had asked for the communications earlier under a Freedom of Information Act request.

After discovering many of the emails had been redacted, ICM on May 19 asked a judge in Washington, D.C., to force the Department of Commerce to fill in the blanks.

ICM says the e-mails show how the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, a branch of the U.S. Department of Commerce, were subjected to intense pressure to intervene in some way on behalf of the The Family Research Council, and Focus On The Family, two religious conservative lobbyists.

NTIA members then started keeping watch as to how the .xxx proposal was reported in the media, had drafted letters protesting the .xxx domain addressed to ICANN, helped facilitate meetings between ICANN and concerned groups, and otherwise "marshaled our resources at ICANN," as one NTIA official put it in an e-mail.

As the e-mail blitz was going on, Bush’s main political operative, Karl Rove, met with James Dobson, the leader of Focus On The Family, to air his opposition to the .xxx proposal, ICM learned through other sources.

A secret "Stop .XXX" order went in effect shortly after the meeting, according to the documents.

This was all taking place in spite of a ban on such activities called upon by a memorandum of understanding allowing the Department of Commerce to work on a particular project with ICANN involving domain name servers.

"The documents released so far reveal that the United States government exerted undue political influence on ICANN’s consideration of the .xxx domain application, and treated an independent corporation as a client agency of the United States government despite a lack of any legitimate authority to do so," wrote Stuart Lawley, ICM Registry president, in an e-mail to eWEEK.

ICM Registry Renews XXX Domain Quest

ICM Registry has begun efforts to put the .xxx domain back on the agenda, claiming that ICANN’s vote to reject the domain in early May was tainted by misinformation and U.S. government interference.

On Friday, two weeks after the ICANN board of directors cast the nine-to-five vote rejecting the creation of a domain specifically for adult Web sites, ICM began to pursue new options, including legal methods, to push the plan forward.

The vote cast by the ICANN board brought to a close a six-year effort by ICM Registry to create and operate the domain.

According to ICM, a porn-specific domain would produce a clearly identifiable area of the Internet for purveyors of adult content, and would therefore make it easier to prevent kids from inadvertently accessing that material.

Having a porn domain, ICM has argued, also would help the multibillion-dollar adult industry put an end to some of the major problems plaguing the Internet, including porn-related spam.

As part of its plan to bring .xxx back to the table, ICM Registry has released nearly 90 pages of documents it acquired through a Freedom of Information Act request. The documents, ICM claims, demonstrate the highly politicized atmosphere surrounding the discussion about the .xxx domain by officials in the Bush administration during the summer of 2005.

In addition, the company has filed a complaint with the U.S. Federal Court for the District of Columbia, seeking to force the Department of Commerce (DoC) to provide all documents pertaining to the .xxx domain proposal along with any documents it withheld following the DoC’s response to requests that ICM submitted in October and December of last year.

The vote two weeks ago was a 180 degree reversal for the ICANN board, which had given the proposal preliminary approval in June 2005. ICANN postponed making a final decision last August after U.S. government officials voiced opposition to the plan. Another vote, scheduled for December, was deferred once again.

The U.S. government’s reaction to the plan created the perception that the process has become politicized and had many critics questioning ICANN’s independence as a neutral, nonpolitical oversight body.

During the past six months, pressure on ICANN has increased from several fronts, with groups opposing the domain flooding ICANN’s public discussion board with posts critical of the plan.

"The board was certainly very conscious of that [controversy] ... but the heart of the decision today was not driven by a political consideration," Paul Twomey, chief executive of ICANN, was quoted by the Associated Press as saying.

Twomey said the vote was based on whether the creation of the domain would put the organization between the proverbial rock and a hard place, compelling it to enforce hundreds of country-specific laws governing pornography.

Mukul Krishna, a Frost & Sullivan analyst, said the vote showed that ICANN was willing to stand up to pressure against those who supported the creation of the domain. Right now, Krishna said, the issue is simply too controversial for anyone to approve a plan such as this.

The porn industry doesn't want it and governments don't want it, Krishna said. "ICANN doesn't want it because it doesn't have the resources," he said. "But there are a lot of powerful special-interest groups that kept the proposal alive for a long time."

Krishna expects that the issue will fade into the background, at least for a few of years.

A better idea than creating a special domain for porn, according to Krishna, would be to establish a Web site rating system analogous to the kind used for rating movies and TV programming. "That would arguably be less contentious than confining adult sites [to a specific part of the Internet]," Krishna said.

AOL, Startups Emerge to Challenge MySpace

It's only natural for companies large and small to want to capture some of the social-networking magic of MySpace.com, a Web site that has risen out of nowhere to become the Internet's second busiest by successfully figuring out what teens and young adults want.

AOL joined the pack this month with its own take on social networking, a loose term for services that help users expand their circles of friends by exploiting existing connections, rather than meeting randomly or by keyword matches alone.

The rapid growth of MySpace and last year's purchase of its parent company by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. for $580 million "definitely accelerated something," said Greg Sterling, an industry analyst with Sterling Market Intelligence in Oakland, Calif.

"MySpace went from being this curiosity to a cultural phenomenon," Sterling said. "People started to think this is a really, really big opportunity." MySpace offers a mix of features - message boards, games, Web journals - designed to keep its youth-oriented visitors clicking on its advertising-supported pages. The site has successfully built communities around music, becoming the go-to place for emerging bands, and it wants to replicate that success in film and comedy.

Driven largely by word of mouth, MySpace grew astronomically since its launch in January 2004 and is now second in the United States among all Web sites by total page views, behind only Yahoo Inc., according to comScore

Media Metrix.

MySpace’s user base more than quadrupled to nearly 80 million over the past year, with as many as 270,000 joining every day.

Yahoo even announced a home page redesign this week in part to fend off the rising threat, adding recommendations and insights about cultural trends culled from its community of 402 million users worldwide.

Others, mostly startups, are hoping to become the next-generation MySpace, offering more-robust, easier-to-use tools or specialized features for niches.

CollectiveX Inc. launched this month as a network for professionals and other pre-organized groups. Famoodle started in April as a MySpace for families. Relative newcomers Tagged Inc. and Varsity Media Group Inc.’s Varsity World are billing themselves as safe havens for teens.

Even the British Broadcasting Corp., seeing rival News Corp.’s successes, is revamping its Web site to incorporate more user-generated features.

The most notable of the newcomers is AOL’s AIM Pages, which is building upon its already substantial instant-messaging base of 49 million active users worldwide. Still, MySpace’s number is higher - the active subset of registered users who logged on in March was 56 million, according to comScore.

"MySpace is doing phenomenally well," said James Bankoff, AOL’s executive vice president for programming and products.

Nonetheless, Bankoff denied AOL was positioning AIM Pages as "a MySpace killer." Rather, he said, the entrance by Time Warner Inc.’s Internet unit "points to the trend of consumers wanting to express themselves in a more powerful way."

AIM users get a page customizable with any number of drag-and-drop modules for maps, Web journals and other features, including those from rivals like Yahoo’s Flickr photo site. By contrast, MySpace users must deal with HTML programming code to customize.

The offering, available in a beta test mode, underscores AOL’s history of playing down innovation in favor of waiting until the masses are ready. It wants to be easy, not necessarily first.

MySpace wasn’t first, either. But it surpassed Friendster Inc. in monthly visitors just a half-year after formally launching.

Analysts note that if Friendster can fall, so can MySpace.

"It’s like the one hot bar or restaurant everybody descends upon," Sterling said. "Then it gets cold and people leave it."

MySpace, whose press representatives said executives were unavailable for interviews, has been continually adding features, including just recently a test version of an instant-messaging program and the hit TV show "24" as free and for-pay downloads.

Potential rivals insist they are doing more.

TagWorld Inc. and Freewebs Corp. let users build entire Web sites, not just

single profile pages. Both see themselves as people’s hubs for music, photos and video, while many MySpace users embed in their profile pages digital items stored elsewhere.

A Microsoft Corp. spinoff company, though mum on specifics, plans to launch Wallop later this year with promises of helping people better interact more like they would in the real world.

That’s also the thinking behind CollectiveX.

"CollectiveX doesn’t expand or create communities," founder Clarence Wooten said. "It empowers existing communities."

So members of pre-existing groups, such as a homeowners association, could use CollectiveX to communicate and meet one another - but only if someone they already know introduces them.

Groups are visible only to their members, and even within groups, a person’s friends and colleagues are described only by title, not by name. By contrast, MySpace makes most profiles publicly viewable and users easily reachable.

Meanwhile, some startups see MySpace as the new mass media - too big to appeal to any one demographic group well.

Adir Levy figures that once people get married, they’re no longer keen on meeting new faces on MySpace, where about a quarter of the users are minors. So he developed Famoodle as a site for families to connect and expand existing relations.

"We definitely don’t see us as becoming as big as MySpace, but we see ourselves as being the MySpace for the more mature crowd," said Levy, 25, who’s getting married this year.

Others are targeting teens, the group that has turned MySpace into a lightning rod for warnings about the dangers posed by sexual predators on the Internet.

At Varsity World, moderators screen most writings, photos and other materials before posting. Tagged has features - among them, a weekly celebrity lookalike contest - likely to be seen as immature by even college students, said its founder, Greg Tseng.

"MySpace and the industry as a whole is really in the first inning," Tseng said.

MySpace’s 80 million users is but a fraction of the estimated global online population of 1 billion.

Charlene Li, an analyst at Forrester Research, said users also can have multiple profiles at multiple sites - the way they may belong to separate school, work, neighborhood and church networks in the offline world.

But not everyone will have time to keep up. In fact, only about 60 percent of MySpace’s U.S. registered users visited the site in April, according to calculations of data from MySpace and Nielsen/NetRatings.

"You may have four or five e-mail addresses, but you use two of them," Sterling said. "You’re going to go to one or two places. You’re not going to go to four."

School District Creates MySpace Pledge

Before posting racy blogs on social-networking sites such as MySpace, teens in an Illinois school district might want to think twice. The consequences of such behavior could get them removed from extracurricular activities.

The board for Community High School District 128 voted unanimously this week to require students participating in after-school athletics, fine arts, and other clubs to sign a pledge agreeing that posts on the Internet containing evidence of "illegal or inappropriate" behavior could be justification for disciplinary action.

School officials said they will not conduct regular searches of the main social-networking sites, but will respond to tips from other students, parents, or community members. The new rule will go into effect at the start of the next school year.

Located in Lake County, north of Chicago, District 128 is home to some 3,200 students, roughly 80 percent of whom participate in extracurricular activities.

Social-networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, are wildly popular among the 20-and-under crowd. Nearly 80 million users post personal information, blogs, and pictures on these sites.

The Illinois school district joins a growing list of educational institutions that either have banned the sites from school computers or taken action against students for their posts.

Social-networking sites have even caught the attention of Congress. Rep. Michael G. Fitzpatrick, (R-Penn.) has introduced legislation called the Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA).

If approved, the legislation would block access to online social networks in libraries and federally funded schools.

Mukul Krishna, an analyst at Frost & Sullivan, said that school administrators need to refine their definition of "illegal or inappropriate" posts. As the rule stands, according to Krishna, any attempts to enforce it will more than likely see the school district defending its actions in court.

"It could be an issue of free speech," Krishna said. "Or it could be a case of discrimination - if a student who does not participate in extracurricular activities is not disciplined for posting inappropriate content."

In 1969, the Supreme Court, in Tinker v. Des Moines, ruled that public schools can restrict students' First Amendment rights only if what they say materially disrupts a school's operations. That ruling deals with speech. Experts have said that it is unclear whether the same standard applies to comments or activities posted online.

Recent lower court rulings have swung both ways. A 1998 case in Missouri ended with a ruling that the Woodland School District wrongly disciplined a student for posting online offensive comments about his school and

faculty members.

"I would assume that the kids who don’t want to get caught will try to outsmart the system by assuming an online identity," Krishna said. "The school’s heart seems to be in the right place, but you need more than heart here."

Google Tops Another Search Survey

Google has come out on top of yet another survey of the search-engine market, following the company’s top rankings on recent surveys by HitWise and Nielsen//NetRatings. Analysis firm ComScore Networks’ latest rankings report indicates that, in April, Google gained market share for the ninth consecutive month.

The Reston, Virginia-based firm said that Google maintained its top position by capturing 43.1 percent of all U.S. searches. Yahoo remained in second place with 28 percent, while MSN came in third place with 12.9 percent.

"These figures are very similar to recent survey data from HitWise and NetRatings," said Charlene Li, an analyst at Forrester Research. "They are also very similar to a U.S. survey Forrester Research carried out last fall which put Google in top place for Internet searches."

The ComScore report indicates that Google’s market share rose from 36.5 percent in April 2005 to 42.7 percent in March 2006, while Yahoo fell from 30.7 percent in April last year to 28 percent in March 2006.

MSN also declined, with its market share falling from 16.1 percent in April 2005 to 13.2 percent in March.

Moreover, the ComScore report revealed that new entrant MySpace.com captured 0.6 percent of the search market in April 2006, while Ask.com saw its market share fall from 6.1 in April 2005 to 5.9 percent in March 2006 and 5.8 percent in April.

Time Warner Network’s search market share declined from 9 percent in April 2005 to 7.6 percent in March 2006 and 5.8 percent in April. America Online is owned by Time Warner.

While Google continues to dominate the world of search, experts say that the company cannot afford to be complacent in light of the fierce competition for Internet users.

"It won a lot of users over the last five years, but it could easily lose them," said Li. "Search is one of the least ’sticky’ Internet applications, which is why Google has been so busy launching new features."

Li noted that both Yahoo and Google are developing advanced search services that are designed with better, more-personalized recommendations in mind.

"They are using different approaches," she said. "Google is adopting a technological approach using complex search algorithms based on past searches by a user, while Yahoo looks at its records of what other people with similar interests are searching for."

According to NetRatings, Google was the top U.S. search engine in March 2006, with 2.9 billion searches, followed by Yahoo with 1.3 billion searches.

While HitWise's U.S. Internet user survey also shows Google in the top spot for searches, with a 47.4 percent share in the week ending May 13, it reveals that Google is not doing so well when it comes to e-mail or vertical portals.

In e-mail, Yahoo Mail was the top player in the week ending May 13 with 42.4 percent, beating Microsoft's Hotmail service that had 22.9 percent. Google's Gmail service had a dismal 2.54 percent, according to HitWise.

The HitWise survey indicates that Yahoo also leads in vertical portals. According to HitWise, Yahoo News had a 6.3 percent share of the news-portal market in the week ending May 13, compared to Google News, which had just 1.49 percent.

Microsoft Starts Windows Test, Launch On Target

Microsoft Corp. launched its second major test version of the Windows Vista operating system on Tuesday as a senior executive said he was "confident" the company will meet its targeted release date.

The world's largest software company also said it was starting trials of its upcoming Office 2007 business software suite and its Windows Server system code-named "Longhorn."

The next version of Windows is called Vista and will be the first major overhaul in five years of the operating system, which sits on 90 percent of the world's computers and accounts for nearly a third of Microsoft's total revenue.

The follow-up to the current Windows XP offers beefed-up security, translucent windows for easier scrolling and can display and record high-definition television on the computer. It also allows the user to search for information on the PC and across the network.

Microsoft originally targeted a 2005 launch for Vista, then pushed the release out to 2006 before announcing in March that Vista would again be delayed. Microsoft set a January 2007 launch for retail consumers and it pushed back the launch of Office 2007 to move together with Vista.

Long-time Windows chief Jim Allchin said Microsoft is confident it will meet its launch target, even though other Windows releases have undergone a longer gap between second test release and the start of production.

"At the top level, (this test version is) better quality than most things we've released before," Allchin, co-president of the company's Platforms & Services Division, said in an interview.

Earlier this month, research group Gartner Inc. said the company likely would delay the new Windows launch by at least three months because it is so complex. Gartner had expected Microsoft to release the second major test version or "beta 2" of Vista during the current quarter.

"Our position has been that we believe it will ship in wide release nine

to 12 months after beta 2," said Michael Silver, research vice president at Gartner. "We still think there are significant challenges."

Windows Vista, Office 2007 and "Longhorn" represent a set of crucial new product releases for the company's effort to stimulate sales growth and jump-start a stock that has underperformed every major U.S. stock index since 2002.

"Each of these is a very important product," said Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates at the Windows Hardware Engineering Conference, adding that they were the company's "three most important products."

Allchin, who announced last year that he planned to retire once Vista was complete, said the company is better able to track the trouble spots users encounter within the Vista test and assign engineers to fix the bugs.

Microsoft has "thousands" of engineers working around the clock to fix problems. Allchin said the company aims to improve Vista's compatibility with certain applications, performance and the ability of users to upgrade from Windows XP.

Allchin said he would not hesitate delaying the release of Vista again if the product's quality were not up to par.

"We took a lot of pain for moving the date before, but quality will remain the top thing. However, we feel very good about where we are at," said Allchin.

Quark Ships QuarkXPress 7

Quark on Tuesday announced that its much anticipated page-layout application, QuarkXPress 7, is shipping. The shipping version is not a Universal Binary, meaning it will not run natively on Apple's new Intel-based Macs.

During his presentation this morning in New York, Quark Senior Vice President of Desktop Products, Jurgen Kurz, confirmed that QuarkXPress 7 is a PowerPC application. Kurz said that an Intel-native version would be released this summer as a free update.

We think this is a significant upgrade, Richard Pasewark, senior vice president, Sales and Marketing, told Macworld. It s where the market is going, and as more Mac users add Intel-based Macs to their workflows, we plan to support them. Pasewark added that the Universal Binary version has been in beta testing since the beginning of May.

Based on the JDF standard, Quark will use what it calls the Quark Job Jacket, which incorporates detailed workflow and prepress information directly into a QuarkXPress project. Specifically, the Quark Job Jacket will contain contact information, resources required, layout intent, rules, output specifications and other information. Using this information will prevent errors during the publication• A-A-s creation and output processes, according to the company.

In addition to rule-based preflight capabilities to ensure that files are output-ready at any point in the design process, QuarkXPress 7 will also ensure that all the elements needed for production (fonts, colors, images,

etc.) are automatically embedded with the output file for PDF/X compliant output.

Quark will also add database publishing with the use of Personalized Print Markup Language (PPML). Using PPML all static content, multiple instances of same static content, synchronized content and master page elements will be recognized as reusable objects. Reusing content elements, users will now be able to create multiple document types, sizes and media for multiple print and Web layouts.

With the new version, Quark is offering new transparency features, giving users control over the opacity of the elements that make up any items or content in QuarkXPress like text, pictures, blends, boxes, frames, lines and tables.

According to the company, QuarkXPress 7 will offer greater control over transparency than other applications by managing opacity levels for any color element of an object rather than on an object-by-object basis. The transparency features will also enable the creation of dynamic, soft drop shadows, as well as the ability to mask pictures with soft edges using alpha channels this includes native Photoshop transparency in PSD or TIFF format.

With the new version of QuarkXPress comes a new pricing structure. The full version sells for $749; upgrades from version 3 and up are available for $249. Educational pricing is also available the full educational version costs $199, with upgrades priced at $99. Lab-pak seats cost $99, and upgrades to Lab-packs cost $89.

This latest version introduces forward-thinking concepts and capabilities in response to evolving market needs and customer feedback, Kurz said. Based on the early response we ve heard from customers and the critical acclaim QuarkXPress 7 has received from leaders in the industry, we believe QuarkXPress 7 will revolutionize the way creative professionals work.

Quark has also extended its retail reach with this new release, with QuarkXPress 7 available at leading mail-order retailers, as well as Apple s retail stores. Further pricing and product information for QuarkXPress 7 is available at the company s Web site.

Quark unveiled the updated page-layout application during a press event in New York Tuesday morning.

LAPD Launches Community Web Log

Welcome to the blogosphere, chief. And "good luck with your cesspool of crime, disease and victimhood."

Such was top Los Angeles cop William J. Bratton’s introduction to the rough-and-tumble world of online bulletin boards following his inaugural posting on LAPDblog.org.

Just a week old, the site makes the Los Angeles department the biggest police force in the United States - and one of the first worldwide - to blog.

So far, the "cesspool" post notwithstanding, Bratton’s message and

responses to it have largely been positive. The site’s 24,000 visitors see announcements for department events and recycled press releases.

The point is to build public trust by improving communication - to create an online give-and-take, even when the taking smarts.

"We want to hear feedback," said Lt. Paul Vernon, who is helping to oversee LAPDblog.org. "We welcome them, however serious or tongue-in-cheek they are."

As long as posts aren’t profane and do not attack specific officers, they will stay online, police promise.

In one small test of that openness, one poster jabbed Bratton for his frequent trips: "The best thing about your blog is you can post it while at an airport. That way no one will know you are out of town! :)"

Police from Karnataka, India, to Eden Prairie, Minn., have started blogs and say they are happy with the results. Visitors to LAPD’s blog say candor from a historically tightlipped department will determine the site’s success.

"To say ‘blogging’ implies having a conversation with the public," said media critic Jeff Jarvis. "It will be very hard for them to do. What’s going to happen when there’s another controversy in L.A.? Are they going to get into deep conversation about Rodney King? I’d be surprised."

But Sean Bonner, whose online prodding helped inspire the blog’s launch, said Los Angeles police need time to get used to a new medium.

"They’re all brand new to blogs," said Bonner, the Los Angeles-based co-founder of metroblogging.com, a worldwide network of city blogs. "They’ve been calling me and asking questions. They want to do it right."

Internet Searches: Librarians Do It Better

Cancer patients seeking timely, accurate, unbiased information on the Internet about a disease and its treatment might do well to enlist the help of a professional librarian.

According to a study reported today at the Medical Library Association’s annual meeting in Phoenix, cancer patients are more likely to find what they are looking for with a librarian-mediated search instead of "going it alone."

Over the last five years, Ruti Volk, a professional librarian and manager of the Patient Education Resource Center (PERC) at the University of Michigan Comprehensive Cancer Center, and colleagues have done about 2,100 searches for cancer patients. After each mediated-search, patients are asked to complete an evaluation on the information provided to them.

Results from 513 evaluations revealed several interesting findings, Volk noted in an interview with Reuters Health. "One of the most interesting was that 65 percent of patients said they were not able to obtain the information that we sent to them from any other source. They were not able to get it by themselves by using the Internet; they didn’t get it from a healthcare provider or from a cancer organization."

An additional 30 percent of PERC visitors said the librarian provided some new information. Only 4 percent said they found all the same information on their own.

"This demonstrates," said Volk, "that even though the information is supposedly so accessible and everything is on the web, people still need the help of a professional to find information that is relevant to them that is current and accurate and authoritative."

Librarians have access to resources sometimes unavailable to the public such as subscription-based databases. But the biggest advantage, Volk said, is expertise in searching. "I do this every day, I should do it better than other people," she said.

Most comprehensive cancer centers have patient resource centers, but not all of them are staffed by trained librarians skilled in finding pertinent healthcare information, Volk also noted.

"If people want to gain an in-depth understanding of their condition or they have a complex question, it is wise to enlist the help of a professional librarian," she said.

Bugs Push Windows Live Mail Beta Back

Microsoft last week acknowledged problems with its most recent beta release of Windows Live Mail, the company’s revamp of the Hotmail hosted e-mail service.

Live Mail has been restored to an earlier release because of bugs with the newest version, M6, wrote Ben Poon, a program manager with Windows Live Mail, on a company blog. The Russian-language version is also affected.

"We’ll bring that right back, too," he wrote.

Firefox browser users, however, will see the "Classic Hotmail" interface for now because of the rollback, he wrote.

Microsoft planned to add support for Firefox in the M6 release.

Microsoft plans several changes in the M6 version, including extending from 30 days to 120 days the time allotted from when an account expires after it isn’t used.

Other features include overall faster performance, signature support, and color-scheme changes.

Users have reported various bugs in the beta version on Microsoft’s Windows Live Mail blog. Some users who signed up for the beta release reported troubles with switching back to the older version.

Microsoft has cautioned beta version users that it’s still resolving problems.

Flaw Found in Symantec AntiVirus

Researchers at eEye Digital Security have discovered a serious flaw in Symantec's enterprise antivirus software that could be used by hackers to create a self-replicating "worm" attack against Symantec users.

Because Symantec has not yet confirmed the existence of the problem, much less patched it, eEye is offering few details on the vulnerability, which was first disclosed late Wednesday.

"This is definitely a wormable flaw," said Mike Puterbaugh, eEye's vice president of marketing. "It does allow you to take remote control of the system."

Similar to viruses, worms are able to spread from computer to computer, and past attacks such as 2003's Blaster and Slammer worms were widespread.

Symantec is evaluating eEye's claims and "if necessary, will provide a prompt response and solution," a Symantec spokesman said Thursday.

EEye Chief Hacking Officer Marc Maiffret believes that it will take Symantec a "month or two" to patch the problem. "The vulnerability is pretty straightforward for them to identify within their code," he said.

Version 10 and greater of Symantec's enterprise antivirus software is affected by the flaw, but the company's consumer products do not have the bug, Maiffret said.

This is not the first flaw to be reported in Symantec's security products, which have increasingly come under the scrutiny of hackers and security researchers over the past year. Last December, researcher Alex Wheeler discovered a flaw in Symantec's Antivirus Library that could allow remote attackers to gain control of systems that used Symantec's products.

In October a critical flaw was found in the company's Scan Engine software.

House Judiciary Passes Internet Access Measure

The U.S. House Judiciary Committee on Thursday approved legislation aimed at preventing high-speed Internet network providers from discriminating against unaffiliated services, content and applications.

Content providers like Google Inc., Microsoft Corp. and Yahoo Inc. have expressed concerns that they would be forced to pay Internet service providers extra to ensure consumers can access their content.

The measure, approved by a vote of 20-13, would amend U.S. antitrust law. It would also counter a rival bill from another House committee that wants to encourage network providers to preserve consumers' ability to freely surf the Internet instead of adopting stricter rules.

"The lack of competition in the broadband marketplace presents a clear incentive for providers to leverage dominant market power over the broadband bottleneck to pre-select, favor or prioritize Internet content over their networks," said Judiciary Chairman James Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin.

Mergers May Be Next Trend for Big Internet Companies

Speculation is rife on Wall Street that a big Internet deal or alliance is in the works, with Google, Yahoo, eBay or Microsoft as possible partners - and a Yahoo-eBay partnership seen as most likely.

"A partnership or merger between eBay and Yahoo! is the most strategically feasible," a report authored by analyst Imran Khan and the JP Morgan Internet team said on Monday.

"A combined company would have the leading position in auctions, communications, payments, graphical advertising, audience reach, and geographic breadth," the report said.

Silicon Valley insiders, high-tech bankers and financial analysts are giving new credence to potential merger deals, which fly in the face of common wisdom that the Internet's rapid growth has always outweighed the logic of consolidation.

But Internet growth is slowing and competition among the biggest companies - Google Inc., Yahoo Inc., eBay Inc. and Microsoft Corp. - is intensifying.

EBay stock is down 30 percent on the year. Yahoo is off 20 percent and Google down 10 percent.

Google, which nearly doubled its revenues last year, is expected to grow 62 percent this year. EBay is seen growing 30 percent, down from 50 percent two years ago, and Yahoo's growth is slowing at a similar pace.

EBay spokesman Hani Durzy said the company works very closely with all the major Web search providers - Google, Yahoo and Microsoft, but he declined to comment on any potential Yahoo tie-up.

EBay is one of the world's biggest buyers of Web search terms. It manages a portfolio of 15 million keywords on different search sites aimed at wooing bidders.

"We don't comment on rumors and speculation," Durzy said. "We are talking to Yahoo and other companies all the time as part of our normal course of business."

The 56-page JP Morgan report weighs other scenarios, including the possibility that Microsoft Corp.'s MSN Internet unit would strike a partnership with Yahoo. Google is viewed as likely to sit out big mergers and continue to go it alone, Imran argues, a view that many Wall Street analysts share.

Investors worry that gains by these companies are likely to come at the expense of one another, rather than through Internet expansion, driving shares down this year.

Microsoft shares are off 12 percent so far in 2006, hit by product delays as well as a recent move by the company to step up investment to better compete with Google and Yahoo.

Market share gains by Google are most frequently said to be driving the talk of partnerships or mergers.

On May 3, the Wall Street Journal newspaper carried a story that Microsoft's MSN unit was planning a stop-Google strategy by seeking to buy a stake in Yahoo.

Last week, Yahoo Chief Executive Terry Semel confirmed that his company had been approached by Microsoft to buy a piece of Yahoo's search business. He ruled out a deal for what he viewed as a centerpiece of Yahoo's strategy to sell Web advertising.

"I will not sell a piece of search - it is like selling your right arm while keeping your left; it does not make any sense," Semel said in a public forum in New York last week where he was interviewed by The New Yorker magazine writer Ken Auletta.

He dismissed an outright merger between Microsoft and Yahoo, saying, "That conversation has never come up."

"For me the most interesting alignment would be putting together Yahoo and eBay," said analyst Scott Devitt of brokerage Stifel Nicolaus, but he cautioned: "These things tend to be discussed often and rarely occur."

The strengths of Yahoo and eBay are seen as complementary, with Yahoo in media and eBay in e-commerce. Yahoo's foreign strength is in Asia and eBay's is in Europe.

The most compelling scenario is an alliance where eBay uses Yahoo search to drive consumers to eBay auctions, Devitt said.

In return, Yahoo could take advantage of assets such as eBay's PayPal online payments franchise and the vast Skype Web telephone audience that eBay has acquired, he said.

EBay must tread carefully, however, so that it does not cut off ties to Google. As the world leader in Web search, eBay depends on Google search referrals for an increasing amount of its audience.

"I don't particularly find eBay in a position of power," Devitt said. "EBay needs its relationship with Google."

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